The Crisis of *Johannesburg*

September 2026

An agenda for institutional reform

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This report was commissioned by the Centre for Development and Enterprise (CDE) to inform its policy series, ***Johannesburg Matters: Fixing South Africa's Growth Engine***.

Johannesburg Matters is a series of reports from CDE that sets out to provide analysis and recommendations that a reformed Johannesburg administration could implement after the 4 November 2026 Local Government Elections.

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Executive Summary

The City of Johannesburg is in crisis. Failing infrastructure, unreliable water and electricity supply, a mounting maintenance backlog, deteriorating financial controls, a swelling wage bill, unstable coalitions, and rapid mayoral turnover have together eroded public confidence in the City's ability to perform even its most basic functions. Statistics South Africa data suggest that hundreds of thousands of residents have quit the City, among them thousands of middle-class householders that have long constituted the City's tax base. Johannesburg's population growth now lags well behind other major South African cities. Official accounts, including the Mayor's own 2026 State of the City Address, register these symptoms, but stop short of a genuine diagnosis of how and why they cohere into a single, systemic crisis.

This working paper argues that the conventional diagnosis – that Johannesburg's crisis is simply one of poor governance and weak leadership – is insufficient. The deeper problem is institutional and legal. The Municipal Systems Act vests the power to appoint the municipal manager and senior managers in the council, rather than in the administration itself, and permits the council to instruct any political office-bearer, councillor or staff member to perform municipal duties. The effect is that a genuinely autonomous, professional municipal administration which is insulated from party political control has rarely been able to emerge in Johannesburg. Where it has existed, its autonomy has been discretionary and performative, present only for as long as the governing party chooses to act as though it exists.

Tracing the City's institutional history since its 2000 amalgamation, the report shows how this ambivalence has played out in practice. The iGoli 2002 plan briefly insulated utilities such as City Power, Johannesburg Water and Pikitup behind a corporate boundary, and a relatively autonomous administrative space emerged under City Manager Trevor Fowler during Parks Tau's mayorship (though this rested on Fowler's personal standing within the ANC rather than on any institutional guarantee). Since the onset of coalition governments in 2016, this fragile arrangement has been steadily hollowed out. Municipal utilities and departments have become the spoils of coalition bargaining, driving high turnover among boards and executives, a marked decline in technical

skills, and, directly, Johannesburg's chronic billing failures and deepening fiscal distress.

Additionally, the (often illegal) actions of the South African Municipal Workers' Union have exacerbated service delivery failures and resulted in fractious relationships between the City and its utilities, and many municipal employees.

The report sets out an agenda for reform. Nationally, it recommends that local government legislation formally institutionalises the administration as an autonomous sphere of government, including through a statutory Municipal Managers' Professional Council to register, certify and discipline senior municipal officials, while leaving formal appointment powers with elected councils. Locally, an incoming administration should: appoint the city manager through a transparent, merit-based process; grant that office real authority over staffing, delegations and administrative decisions; confine the executive mayor and Mayoral Committee to policy-setting and oversight rather than operational instruction; restore professional, five-year tenure boards to the City's utilities; re-establish a properly staffed Contracts Management Unit to monitor service delivery agreements and enforce sanctions for non-performance; and resolve, rather than continue to obscure, the billing crisis by clarifying who controls utility revenue, customer credit and disconnections.

Absent this institutional separation between political authority and professional administration, the report concludes, technical interventions in Johannesburg's finances, infrastructure and service delivery are unlikely to hold.

1.
Introduction

Johannesburg (Joburg, the City) is in crisis. The symptoms are well documented: failing infrastructure, an unreliable supply of water and electricity, anaemic capital expenditure, a mounting backlog of maintenance, eroding financial controls set against a swelling wage bill, unstable coalitions, and a rapid turnover of mayors and senior officials. Together they have produced a loss of public confidence in the City's capacity to perform even its most elementary functions. The evidence from Statistics South Africa and other sources suggests that hundreds of thousands of people are leaving or have already left, among them thousands of middle-class householders that have long constituted the City's tax base. Indeed, Johannesburg's population growth now lags far behind many other South African cities, especially Cape Town.[1]

In Mayor Morero's 2026 State of the City Address, some of these problems were acknowledged, not as an admission that the city was in crisis, however, but to point to its renewal, saying "The new economic democracy continues to rise" and assuring Johannesburg residents that "The foundation remains and a brighter future is certain".[2] There is certainly something out of touch with reality about the mayor's analysis, though the distance between his conclusions about the City and those of journalists and urban scholars affirms a philosophical axiom. Diagnosing a problem differs from simply collecting and describing facts. We may collect data on water outages, coalition changes, municipal debt, billing failures, potholes, housing backlogs, crime, voter turnout, and public dissatisfaction. Those observations are useful. But by themselves they do not give us a diagnosis of Johannesburg's governance crisis. They give us a list of symptoms.

To arrive at a diagnosis, we need to understand how those symptoms are internally connected. For example, how fiscal stress, infrastructure decay, political instability, apartheid spatial form, administrative fragmentation, public mistrust, and uneven service delivery reinforce one another. In other words, a diagnosis is a concept that explains why the elements of a phenomenon belong together and how their relation produces the phenomenon's observable form.

This report draws on definitions of 'governance' and 'good governance' as contained in the 2026 Draft White Paper on Local Government (DWPLG, the White Paper), published by the Department of Cooperative Governance, to develop a working notion of crisis. It will be used to diagnose the institutional crisis in Johannesburg and propose ways out of it.

> Governance is the ongoing set of relationships, norms and decision practices through which society coordinates collective action and resolves conflict across state, market and civil society - through networks of power and accountability that shape who participates, whose knowledge counts, how trade-offs are negotiated, and how decisions are made, implemented and revised.[3]

The DWPLG continues:

> Good governance is when those relationships enable society to steer towards agreed public goals in ways that are legitimate, fair and effective - combining ethical conduct and clear rules with real capability to plan, coordinate and deliver; making accountability lived; and being inclusive, transparent, responsive, equitable and adaptive.[4]

Immediately following the definition of governance, the White Paper notes that a "systems perspective" is central to its analysis and its recommendations.

> Local government performance emerges from interacting systems: political and community governance, administration, finance, spatial planning, infrastructure, economic development, environment and climate, and intergovernmental relations.[5]

Although these definitions are coherent, they are not equivalent. The definition of governance does not use the term system. Nonetheless, it is possible to reconcile them as follows (which I believe is the sense of the White Paper definition). If we consider 'the state', 'the market' and 'civil society' as systems, *governance becomes the problem of coordination between systems whose internal logics are incommensurate*. On these terms the crisis of Johannesburg is a governance problem, in which the City's different systems (political, community, administration, finance, spatial planning, etc) are poorly coordinated.

There are two versions of this argument, academic and political. The first is structural and relates to the difficulty of coordinating service delivery in the City when the entities responsible for providing electricity and water are separate companies that have an arm's length relationship to Joburg's own governance structures. Herman Mashaba, the first Democratic Alliance (DA) mayor of Johannesburg made this argument, and he has repeated it in his 2026 manifesto as the head of ActionSA, the political party he formed after leaving the DA in late 2019. The second version of this argument refers to the qualities of Johannesburg's leaders, who are said to break the law frequently or fail to uphold it.[6]

There is, however, another way of understanding Joburg's crisis. If we return to the White Paper's analysis of a system, we will see that it defines the problem as one of coordinating discrete and autonomous areas or domains (sub-systems) of a city: political and community governance, administration, finance, spatial planning, infrastructure, economic development and so on. The authors of the White Paper, however, assume that these domains already exist as discrete sub-systems or areas. In particular they take as given that a domain called 'administration' exists as a distinct sphere or sub-system.[7]

The argument here is that the crisis of the City of Johannesburg relates institutionally to the *failure to allow the sphere of administration to emerge in its own right*. This is both a legal and political issue, which itself speaks to how local government policy-makers in the 1990s, like those developing the Public Service Act of 1994, were deeply suspicious of administrations inherited from the apartheid government, and how they deliberately blurred the lines between political and administrative roles.

This report examines the legal foundations of what I will call a *metropolitan patronage system*. It shows how the Municipal Systems Act[8] (MSA) gives municipal councils decisive influence over the appointment of the municipal manager and senior managers directly accountable to that office. The law, moreover, blurs the boundary between political authority and administrative execution by allowing councils to define roles, allocate responsibilities and instruct political office-bearers, councillors or staff members to perform municipal duties. The result is not the disappearance of administration as a legal category, but its weakening as a distinct sphere governed by professional norms.

In the early 2000s, Johannesburg, in effect, insulated administration from the political life of the City in municipal entities (City Power, Johannesburg Water, and the Johannesburg Roads Agency, for example). The institutional history of Johannesburg is largely a story of the institutional struggle to overcome this autonomy by deploying political cadres to the boards and executives of these municipal companies and by subjecting operational decisions in the City to the office of the Executive Mayor and the Mayoral Committee for approval. In other words, the problem in Johannesburg is that there is *too much governance*, that is, too much (so-called) coordination by the political systems of the city over other areas, to such an extent that an administrative sub-system is prevented from emerging.

We will see that for a short period during the mayoral tenures of Ketso Gordhan and Parks Tau, relatively autonomous administrative space began to emerge. This was a consequence of internal agreements in the African National Congress (ANC), which saw the appointment of city managers with senior authority in the party itself. This allowed them at times to demarcate an area of decision-making beyond the discretion of councillors.

This administrative space, we will see, was precarious and performative, emerging only to the extent that the councillors acted *as if* their powers were limited in certain cases. Such performativity was weakened as the ANC fragmented and the city became a site of fierce contestation between regional political networks. It was largely erased as a DA-Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) coalition took power in the city, dependent on the support of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF). From 2019, when an ANC-led multi-party coalition returned the ANC to power, a concerted effort was made to rein in the utilities by frequently changing the boards of City Power, Johannesburg Water and others and by interfering in the appointment of executives. This report documents how the decline of the institutional autonomy of utilities has come with high turnover amongst directors and executives, as well as the deterioration of the technical skills base of these organisations. The current billing crisis is a consequence, moreover, of this institutional tension. In this context, Johannesburg's operations have been captured by different political parties/networks resulting in the fragmentation of the City, not by geography but by department and by utility.

2.
Origin

The City of Johannesburg was established in 2000, one of eight new metropolitan authorities that dotted the map of post-apartheid South Africa. It was imagined as the antithesis of the 'Apartheid City' and the debates about its institutional design were preoccupied with how to realise a vision of 'developmental local government', that is, of a city that worked with citizens and communities to build sustainable human settlements and improve the quality of life.[9] In this respect, 'Johannesburg' referred to a very different phenomenon to that which the name signified historically.

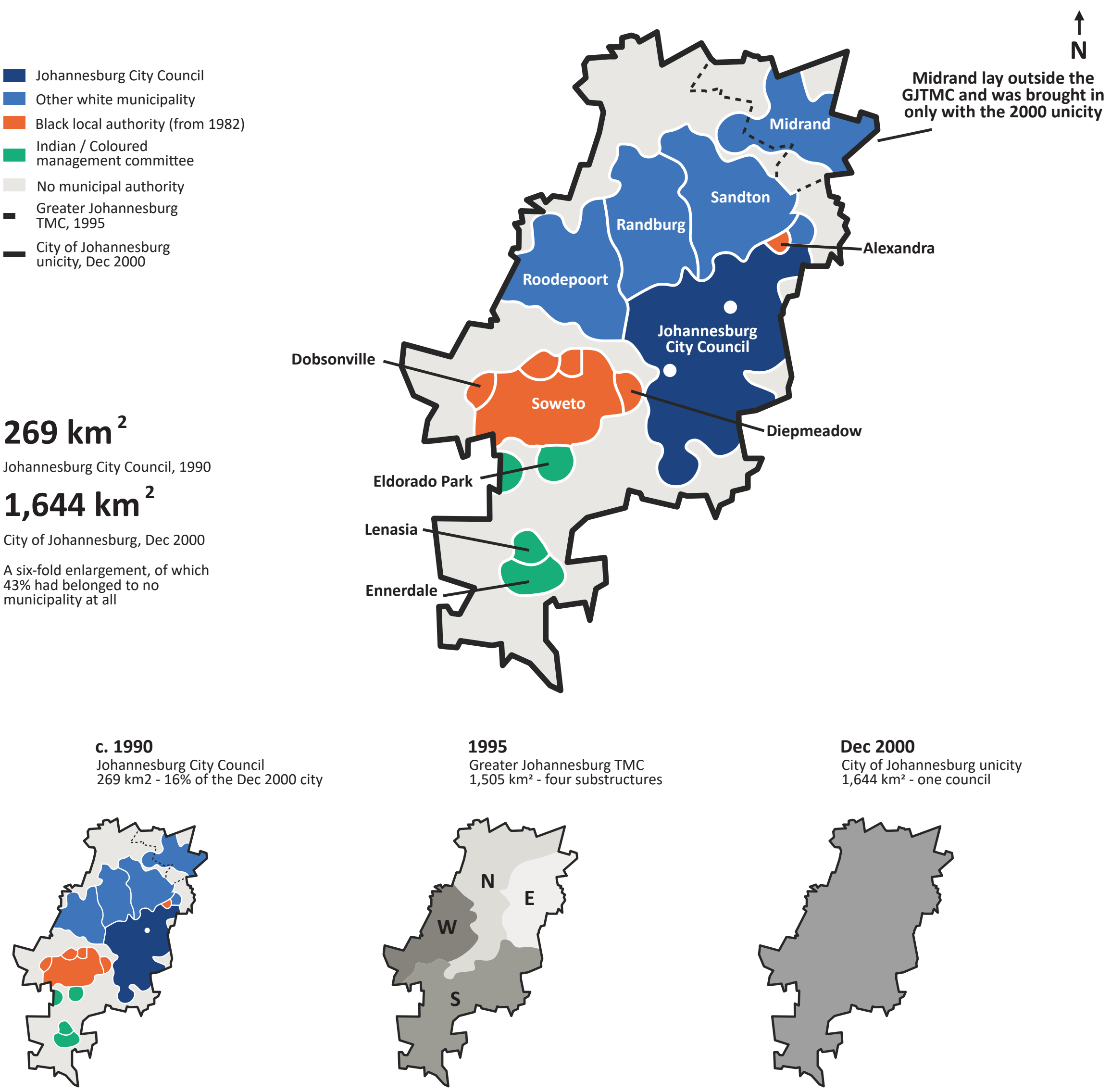
Crucially, it designated a new geography. The pre-2000 city was a relatively compact white municipality, of approximately 269 square kilometres, running from roughly Linbro Park and Lombardy East in the north to Booysens and Kibler Park in the south, and bounded to the west by Roodepoort and to the north by Sandton. Around it sat a constellation of separate white local authorities along the Witwatersrand: Sandton, Randburg, Roodepoort, Edenvale, Alberton, Germiston, Krugersdorp, Boksburg, Benoni, Springs, Brakpan, Nigel and Kempton Park, each with its own town council and rates base.[10]

After the introduction of the Black Local Authorities Act in 1982, Soweto became a city in its own right, as did Alexandra township, Diepkloof, and Meadowlands.[11] Lenasia was declared a Group Area for 'Indians' in 1956 and was administered through an Indian Local Affairs Committee. In 1965, Eldorado Park was classified as a Coloured Group Area and had an equivalent Coloured Management Committee. Both committees reported upwards to a designated white municipality.

In 1995, the Local Government Transition Act 209 of 1993[12] brought these areas together in a Greater Johannesburg Transitional Metropolitan Council (GJTMC), incorporating four substructures, later formalised as four Metropolitan Local Councils (MLCs): the Northern, Southern, Eastern and Western MLCs. Responsible for bulk services across the City, the GJTMC was dependent on revenue collected by the Local Councils. However, this two-tier model proved to be both fiscally and politically unstable, and by 1997 the metropolitan authority was effectively insolvent.[13]

In December 2000, the City of Johannesburg Metropolitan Municipality was established as a single, integrated *unicity*. The four MLCs were dissolved. The new municipal boundary enclosed approximately 1,645 square kilometres, about six times the area of the 1980s Johannesburg City Council, extending roughly 75 kilometres along its north-south axis, from beyond Midrand and Diepsloot in the north to Orange Farm and Ennerdale in the south, and incorporating Sandton, Randburg, Roodepoort, Soweto, Alexandra, Diepmeadow, Dobsonville, Lenasia, Eldorado Park, Ivory Park, Diepsloot and Midrand.[14]

The making of a metropolitan boundary: Johannesburg, 1990-2000



1.
The Erasure of the Administrative Field

The ANC's ambivalence about public administration was evident from the beginning of its rule. In the Public Service Act of 1994, administrative actions, including human resources management (recruitment, for example), and day-to-day operational decision-making in departments, were made the prerogative, not of senior public-service officials, but of the political executive (the President, Cabinet Ministers and Members of Executive Councils (MECs) at Provincial level). Until the passing of the Public Service Amendment Act in April 2026, officials had to wait for their respective ministers or MECs to delegate these functions to them – which was often a wait for Godot.[15]

In local government this was taken even further. The MSA made the council the supreme authority in local government, subjecting all other institutions to its power. In national and provincial government there was a formal distinction between the legislative and executive spheres of government. There was also a formal acknowledgement that administration was a distinct area of practice, even if the law also blurred the separation by granting Ministers at national and provincial level (MECs) powers over recruitment and human resources and over day-to-day operational matters - key administrative powers, that is. In some instances, laws contradicted each other. In the Public Finance Management Act (PFMA), the autonomy of the administration was recognised by making directors-general chief accounting officers. In all other respects, officials could not act unless the responsible minister delegated authority to them.

In municipalities, these distinctions do not even exist formally.[16] The original sin lies with the Constitution, which, in the local government sphere conflates councils as legislative bodies with councils as executive bodies.[17] "The executive and legislative authority of a municipality is vested in its Municipal Council." [18]

Section 55 of the MSA states that the municipal manager is "head of the administration" and is responsible for the "formation and development of an economical, effective, efficient and accountable administration."[19] If, at first glance, this looks like the Act draws a distinction between the municipal administration, under the city manager, and the legislative and executive bodies of the municipality, it does not.

A defining feature of a civil service system is that appointments are governed by objective rules rather than by the discretionary authority of politicians or political parties.[20] Where public employment, promotion and associated benefits are allocated through political or personal discretion, the administration is more accurately described as a patronage system. In such systems, access to office is mediated by actors such as legislatures, political parties, unions, or economic and social elites, rather than by merit-based procedures. This, I argue, is the institutional logic embedded in the MSA: although the head of the municipal administration is formally empowered to appoint staff, that authority is substantially constrained by a broader political environment.

Consider the relevant sections of the Act:

As head of administration the municipal manager of a municipality is responsible and accountable for "the appointment of staff *other than those referred to in section 56(a)* (…)"(emphasis added).[21] Section 56(a) states: "A municipal *council*, after consultation with the municipal manager, appoints a manager directly accountable to the municipal manager" (emphasis added).[22] In other words, the council and not the municipal manager, appoints the head of the administration and the heads of municipal departments.[23] Moreover, the statute itself sets up a tension. The municipal manager is required to operate through managers who are ostensibly accountable to him or her, but who are effectively appointed through a discretionary, political process.

Section 56(b) states that a "person appointed as a manager in terms of paragraph (a) must have the relevant skills and expertise to perform the duties associated with the post in question, taking into account the protection or advancement of persons or categories of persons disadvantaged by unfair discrimination".[24] But the 2000 Act did not define the skills and expertise required, leaving the council with the discretion to come up with its own measures of both. In other words, municipal councillors had wide discretion to appoint the heads of the municipality's service delivery departments according to standards which they themselves developed.

This situation was amended in 2022. Section 56, as substituted by the Municipal Systems Amendment Act 3 of 2022, says that a manager directly accountable to the municipal manager, including an acting manager, must "at least have the skills, expertise, competencies and qualifications as prescribed".[25] It also says the appointment is null and void if the person does not have the prescribed skills, expertise, competencies or qualifications, unless the Minister has waived the requirements in special circumstances. As it stands now, the council appoints managers, but the minimum threshold is prescribed externally (in the 2014 regulations pertaining to Appointment and Conditions of Employment of Senior Managers).[26]

The 2022 amendment limits the ability of councils to apply a subjective view of skills and experience, though it does not change the patrimonial character of the appointment process itself. We might say that the amended MSA tempers the discretionary element of the patrimonial process. Nonetheless, from its establishment in 2000 until at least 2022, a largely patrimonial-based appointment system operated in the City of Johannesburg. It has shaped how the City has functioned, provided services, collected revenue and spent its budget, coinciding with the period during which the symptoms of Johannesburg's crisis accumulated. This situation, however, has been largely ignored in much of the analysis of Johannesburg's dysfunction. Even when scholars have paid attention to municipal bureaucrats – a very welcome development - there has been little writing about the broader institutional structures and systems in which they have to operate.[27]

The MSA not only structures South African municipalities on patrimonial grounds through the selection and appointment process, it also blurs or even dissolves the boundary between the political and administrative spheres of the municipality itself. It does this in the way that it allocates roles and responsibilities to councillors and staff. In Section 53 the MSA states: "A municipality must, (...) *define the specific role and area of responsibility of each political structure and political office bearer* of the municipality and of the *municipal manager*" (emphasis added).[28]

In the chapter on delegations, furthermore, the MSA allows the municipal *council* to "instruct" any "political structure, political office bearer, councillor or staff member to perform any of the municipality's duties."[28] There is an inherent circularity here: the council must define the roles of the council, the mayor, the speaker, and the municipal manager.[32] It is true that these powers are limited by the Municipal Structures Act that defines and explains the core functions and roles of most of these structures and office bearers. In theory, what section 53 of the MSA adds is the obligation to localise, specify, and formalise those roles in a way that is tailored to the particular municipality's circumstances, governance arrangements, and institutional architecture.

This is not the case, however, when it comes to the municipal *administration*. While the composition and organisation of municipal councils, executive committees, executive mayors, sub-councils, and ward committees earn a detailed discussion, all the Municipal Structures Act says about the municipal administration is that the council must appoint a municipal manager who is head of it![29]

If, however, the council may allocate municipal duties to political structures, political office bearers, councillors or staff members through its system of delegations, then the boundary between political authority and administrative execution becomes unstable. The law does not erase the administration entirely; the MSA elsewhere requires municipalities to establish and organise an administration and hold the municipal manager accountable for its overall performance. But the Act does make the administration institutionally vulnerable or even nominal. It places the definition of roles, the allocation of responsibilities and the power of instruction in the hands of the council. The result is not the disappearance of administration as a legal category, but the weakening of administration as a distinct sphere governed by professional, administrative norms. We could say that the MSA, even when it uses the language of a civil service system, installs a patrimonial one.

4. Holding the Patrimonial System in Abeyance

Seen from this perspective, Johannesburg's iGoli 2002 plan[30] was an anomaly. The plan was adopted by the council in 1999 and implemented in stages. It sought to do two things at once. It abolished the two-tier municipal structure and prepared the ground for a single metropolitan municipality, formally created on 5 December 2000. Most notably, major service functions - electricity, water and sanitation, refuse removal, roads, property, the fresh produce market, social housing, parks and recreation - were moved out of line departments and placed in newly incorporated municipally owned entities (MOEs). Each had its own board of directors, a chief executive and a service-delivery agreement (SDA) with the city.

Some of the analysis of iGoli 2002 stresses the *neoliberal* character of the plan, suggesting that it was largely a phenomenon of the World Bank's 'commercialisation' strategy, overtaking concerns for equality, equity, and affordability. The strategy caused "massive conflict with trade unions and a new generation of community groups that came to be federated in the Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF)."[31] In T*he Struggle Against Silent Disconnections*, the Coalition against Water Privatisation, an affiliate of the APF, claimed that prepaid water meters, as proposed in iGoli 2002 "form part of the logic of neoliberal policies, such as privatisation [and] 'cost recovery'; and water has become a big business, with the 'ethics' of the market and profit motives being prioritised over the needs of people." [32]

The plan was certainly informed by the New Public Management (NPM) model, a tendency within the field of public administration that was critical of bureaucracy and open to applying business processes in public institutions. By the early 2000s, however, NPM as a toolkit of organisational techniques and models had drifted from its moorings in Thatcherite conservatism. It had been appropriated by social democrats looking to improve the efficiency of state institutions, while retaining public ownership. Tony Blair had embraced these models as part of his Third-Way politics in Britain.[33] In South Africa, Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi, who served in Mandela's cabinet as Minister of Social Development and then under Mbeki as Minister for Public Service and Administration, had proposed such reforms for the same reason.[34]

Moreover, an exclusively political-ideological reading of iGoli 2002, obscures two important governance motivations.

Firstly, corporatisation institutionalised the separation between policy-making and strategy on the one hand and implementation on the other, locating these functions in separate organisations. Utilities were responsible for the delivery of various services, with employees who had operational expertise: engineers, technicians, managers, etc. Policy-making and strategy were the responsibility of the mayor and mayoral committee and were implemented through a new unit, called the Contracts Management Unit (CMU), which reported directly to the city manager. Later this would be split into a Shareholders Unit, to oversee the financial performance of the entities, and a CMU, to oversee their service delivery performance.[35]

Secondly, the financial model was supposed to incentivise boards and executives to focus on the core mandate of the utility, distributing electricity, making sure that households had access to clean water and that refuse was collected, for example.

Ketso Gordhan and Pascal Moloi (who became

Utilities	Agencies	Corporatised entities
City Power	Johannesburg Roads Agency	Johannesburg Zoo
Johannesburg Water	Johannesburg City Parks	Metropolitan Trading Company
Pikitup		Metrobus
		Joburg Property Company
		Civic Theatre
		Johannesburg Social Housing Company
		The Johannesburg Tourism Company
		Johannesburg Fresh Produce Market

Figure 3: City of Johannesburg Entities 2003 [36]

city manager after Ketso Gordhan's contract with the city expired in 2000) imagined three types of corporatised entity, each with its own revenue stream and business model.[37] Johannesburg Water, City Power and Pikitup (responsible for waste collection) were expected to be self-sufficient, with the prospect of even generating a profit, payable to the shareholder (the City) as a dividend. Some, like the Johannesburg Roads Agency, were envisaged as revenue generating, covering a substantial portion of their costs but needing some support from the City. Finally, there were those corporatised entities, like the Johannesburg Zoo, that were largely dependent on cross-subsidisation.

By foregrounding the commercial character of these entities, iGoli 2002 was effectively betting on the logic of the market to discipline these entities in relation to their core mandates. Hence, if City Power (for example) was financially sustainable, or even profitable, because it distributed electricity to city customers efficiently, then its board and executives, like their counterparts in the private sector, would be incentivised to invest in staff, infrastructure and services to maintain and build its customer base. The problem, however, is that all these entities were local monopolies. Who was City Power, Johannesburg Water or Pikitup competing with?

There is evidence that from a purely financial perspective, the model did initially work. Prior to 2012 the gap between real and budgeted revenue in Johannesburg was as narrow as it was in Cape Town. Given that most of the City's revenue came from its utilities, the convergence between budgeted and actual service-charge revenue suggests that the corporatised utilities were financially viable in the limited sense that they were generating revenue close to budget. It does not, by itself, prove that they were working well operationally, maintaining infrastructure adequately, collecting cash effectively, or delivering equitable and reliable services.

Indeed, therein lay a compelling critique of the model. Many, including some Johannesburg officials, complained that a focus on the financial bottom-line squeezed out the City's developmental mandates. Laila Smith, then head regulator for water in the CMU, worried at the time that utilities were straying from the 'pro-poor' delivery philosophy that they were supposed to support. [38]

However, in a study comparing Cape Town and Johannesburg between 2008/9 and 2024/25, Graeme Götz proposes that the City's crisis is reflected, not only in visible service-delivery or political shortcomings, but also in the deteriorating correlation between the City's budgeted revenue and its actual revenue. Compared to Cape Town, he finds a growing mismatch between these variables in Johannesburg, reflecting expenditure overruns, rising debt impairment, operating deficits and weak capital investment.

> In general, Cape Town demonstrates far tighter and more credible operating revenue budgeting. There is a key challenge in the City of Johannesburg's budgeting for service charges, where actual revenue recognised at the end of the financial year has fallen well short of expectations every year since 2011/12. The position has worsened significantly in recent years.[39]

In 2012, the Innovations for Successful Societies programme at Princeton University conducted a case-study of the Johannesburg reforms. The study identified a tension that anticipated the terms of Johannesburg's later crisis. It noted that the CMU was simply too small, too weak and not sufficiently experienced to hold the City's utilities to account. The authors noted: "The end result was that the new municipal units were in a position to dictate criteria by which the city would hold them accountable." [40]

After Ketso Gordhan left the City, the winds began to shift. "The corporatised structure was watered down and service provision recentralised, despite Pascal Moloi's continued efforts to institutionalise reforms."[41]

We will see shortly that there were concerted efforts to rein in the utilities. This was not simply a progressive move to roll back neoliberalism in the City, but an attempt to bring operational units under tighter political control. In other words, the struggle against the autonomy of the utilities was less a campaign against marketisation and more of a political effort to weaken the administration's institutional power. Over the next decade, the council sought to bring the City in line with the spirit and letter of the MSA and the way other ANC dominated municipalities were organised.

5.
A Political-Administrative Struggle

As provided for in the Municipal Structures Act, in 2000 Johannesburg chose the executive mayoral option. A single councillor was elected by the council as mayor. The mayor appointed a ten-member mayoral committee, with each member holding a portfolio. These ‘executives’ only had delegated authority, however, which the council could remove or change at any time.

The council’s substantive deliberative work, in turn, was channelled through ten Section 80 portfolio committees, mirroring the executive portfolios. Each was chaired by the member of the mayoral committee (MMC) who held the corresponding portfolio.

In practice this meant the council’s deliberative process was, in its substance, the deliberative process of the ‘executive’. Reports flowed upward from executive directors of line departments to the relevant MMCs, were processed through the Section 80 portfolio committees chaired by those same MMCs, and were then formally adopted by the mayoral committee. By the time they reached the council, the substantive decisions had been taken. The ‘executive’ functioned as both player and referee: the political head of a department both managed its operations and chaired the committee that was supposed to scrutinise them.[42] As one scholar noted:

> An obscure division between the executive and legislative roles in municipalities, is a key cause of distress in municipal governance and this conflation of executive and legislative functions in a single body of Council is criticised as limiting the application of governance processes such as accountability, oversight and public participation in municipalities. [43]

In 2005, the Gauteng Department of Local Government undertook a performance review of the metropolitan municipalities in the province. Its conclusion was unflattering. Executive mayoral committees, the review found, were dominant, councils were not exercising effective oversight, and public participation, where it occurred, was procedural only. The review recommended that Section 79 committees, with non-executive chairs and the authority to scrutinise the executive, replace the Section 80 system entirely. Johannesburg was selected as the pilot.[44]

Amos Masondo, who had been elected executive mayor in 2000, implemented many of the report’s proposals. Having served in the provincial legislature of Gauteng, he drew on his experience of the provincial government’s model. Masondo oversaw the dissolution of the Section 80 committees. Ten Section 79 oversight committees were established, each mirroring an executive portfolio: Finance and Economic Development; Community Development; Infrastructure and Services; Development Planning and Urban Management; Housing; Environment; Health; Transportation; Safety; Corporate Services and

Administration. A Municipal Public Accounts Committee was added to exercise a financial scrutiny role.

Later, committees on Gender, Youth and People with Disabilities were added, as well as Governance committees. Eighteen non-executive councillors now chaired committees where, four years earlier, there had been none. The Speaker's role was enlarged to that of chair of the council and curator of its rules. Two further offices were created: a Leader of Executive Business (LOEB) to manage the interface between the executive and the legislature, and a 'Chair of Chairs' to co-ordinate the work of committee chairs. [45]

What was achieved by these reforms? The academic literature is divided. Chikwema found in his study of the governance model in the Johannesburg Metropolitan Municipality that "there are instances and examples of good routine practice, mechanisms and processes on the one hand and the absence of evidence of a 'real' culture and values of oversight, accountability and meaningful public participation on the other."[46] On the most charitable reading, the 2006 reforms introduced an internal separation between the legislative work of council and the executive work of the mayoral committee, replicating the separation of powers in provincial governments in the local sphere.[47]

The reforms, however, did not, indeed could not, address the crux of the problem, which lay in the Constitution and in the MSA. Mayoral committees were not genuine executive authorities and Section 79 committees were not real portfolio committees; they were and remain, at best, advisory bodies, with the power to summon officials but not to sanction them.[48]

The Institutional Review, commissioned by the City of Johannesburg and conducted in 2010/11, found that the City's administrative arrangements were complex, there was fragmentation in the implementation of programmes, tension between departments arising from overlap between their roles and responsibilities, and a lack of cooperation between the City and its entities.[49] The report proposed "build[ing] a high-performing metropolitan government that is responsive and accountable to its residents" by strengthening the "offices of the executive mayor and the City manager, improving accountability, oversight, corporate governance and visible political and administrative leadership."[54]

5.
A Stronger Executive Core

In October 2012, Parks Tau, the new Mayor of Johannesburg (elected in 2011), introduced a 'cluster' system to overcome some of the fragmentation identified as a concern in the Institutional Review. Four sub-committees of the mayoral committee were created, clustering different portfolios together around a 'focus area'. The Sustainable Services cluster brought together the MMCs for Development Planning, Environment Infrastructure and Services, Housing and Transportation. The Economic Growth cluster combined Finance, Economic Development, Corporate and Shared Services and Development Planning. Public Safety, Health and Human Development and Community Development met together. The fourth cluster - Good Governance - included the executive mayor, the MMC for Corporate and Shared Services, the MMC for Finance and the MMC for Economic Development.

Trevor Fowler was appointed as city manager in October 2011, with responsibility for the various municipal departments, as well as acting as shareholder representative on the boards of the Joburg Property Company, the Johannesburg Development Agency, Joburg Water, City Power, Pikitup, the Johannesburg Social Housing Company, Joburg Theatre Management Company and the Zoo, as well as the Johannesburg Roads Agency and Metrobus.

In theory, the City had introduced a separation between legislative, executive and administrative functions. The 2010/11 Annual Report printed the organogram below, neatly depicting the separation between the political and administrative roles of the metropolitan government. In orange was the Executive Mayor, Parks Tau, presiding over the political portfolios. In avocado green, was the City Manager, Trevor Fowler, presiding over the administrative departments (turquoise) and the entities (pale orange).

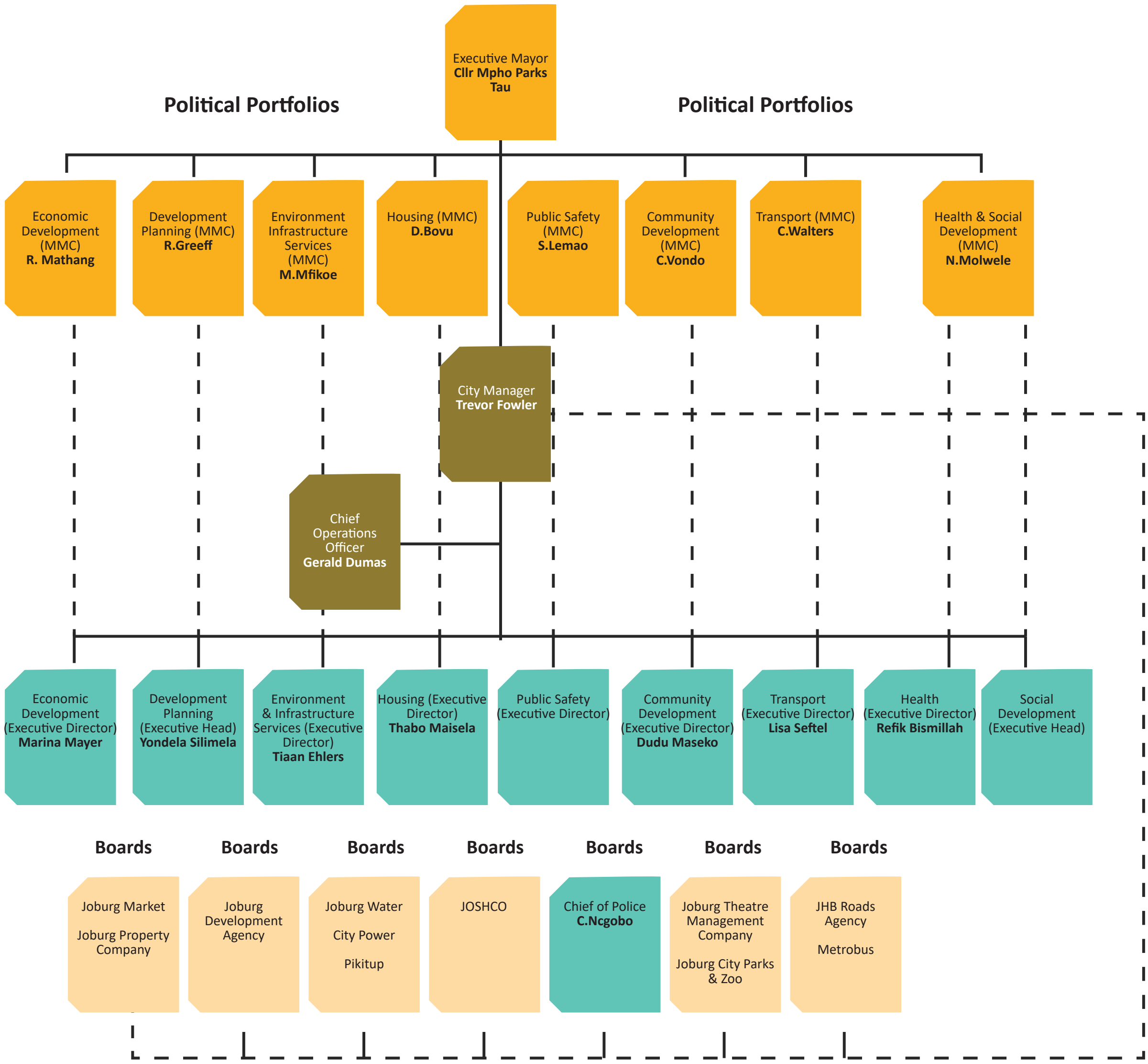


Figure 4: Joburg organogram depicting the separation of executive and administrative functions.[50]

The structure, however, had a basic flaw, which Philip Harrison describes in his ‘autoethnography’ of his time (June 2006 to December 2009) as the Executive Director of Development Planning and Urban Management in the City of Johannesburg. He writes: “The relationship between the administrative head of the department (the Executive Director) and the political head (the MMC) was in fact never adequately defined, and a source of considerable complexity, and occasional dysfunctionality, within the bureaucracy”.[51] Harrison describes how he had won a reprieve from the mayoral committee not to pursue the mass eviction of poor residents in ‘bad buildings’ in the inner city. Nathi Mthethwa, however, then the regional director (RD) for the inner city, went ahead anyway. “I soon realised”, writes Harrison, “that Mayor Masondo had a direct line to the RD, and that many activities in the inner city were outside my purview as Executive Director".[57]

This illustrates how the head of the political executive, Amos Masondo, engaged directly with an official to bypass the head of the department responsible for the inner city and to direct actions that went against the City's own policies. At other times, notes Harrison, Masondo "did his best to insulate the bureaucracy from direct political involvement in financial allocation, tendering and decision-making (around development applications)."[52]

The "constant negotiation" that Harrison describes between political and administrative tasks was not a tension only of the Masondo administration. It ran through Johannesburg governance arrangements. The problem was not that political and administrative roles had not been properly defined. In municipal law, they had hardly been defined at all. The first Masondo administration was preoccupied with defining roles and structures; yet without a basis in law, they were easily ignored.
What we can say, however, is that the Masondo reforms and, later, the reorganisation undertaken by Parks Tau, did create, in practice, a decision-making body that functioned as an executive authority. It did so, however, only *under a specific condition: when a single party held a clear majority*. In other words, the architecture of the City's governance after 2006 was essentially *performative*. The executive existed only to the extent that the council acted as if the executive mayor and the mayoral committee had inherent authority and not delegated powers that the council could remove at any time.

This was true of the 'administration' too, which could only operate as a discrete sphere of government in the City if councillors acted as if it was one. The ghost in Johannesburg's institutional architecture, in other words, was the ANC. As long as the party dominated the council, and as long as it functioned as a coherent entity, it could appoint the executive mayor, the mayoral committee and even control the selection of heads of departments. Internal agreements reached in party spaces could grant these nominal institutions the autonomy and authority that the municipality itself could not.

7.
Things Fall Apart

Johannesburg experienced a long period of political and administrative stability during Masondo's mayorship; despite the intense jocking for power in the local and regional ANC. Masondo seems to have been able to manage party contestation so that it did not destabilise his executive. Masondo was in office for 10 years between 2000 and 2011. He presided over an administration where the turnover amongst senior executives was low, with an average of five years' tenure per senior executive. Parks Tau saw out a full, five-year mandate and there was continuity in personnel between his and Masondo's administrations. As we will see shortly, this stability was not always a sign of an administration getting on with its tasks effectively. It reflected, rather, that the intense conflicts that would wrack the organisation from the end of Thabo Mbeki's period were brewing, rather than overt.

The local government elections of August 2016 produced the first decisive break in the political environment. The ANC lost its outright majority in Johannesburg. A minority coalition led by the DA, with the parliamentary support of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), installed Herman Mashaba as mayor.[53] The arrangement was inherently unstable, and the political history of the city since 2016 has been one of high turnover of executive mayors, MMCs and executives. Mashaba himself resigned in late 2019 before completing a five-year term, and an ANC-EFF coalition assumed power under Executive Mayor Geoff Makhubo. After the 2021 local government elections a coalition government headed by the DA briefly installed Mpho Phalatse as executive mayor.

This was followed by a sequence of motions of no confidence in mayors and rapid mayoral turnover. There were brief and improbable tenures of executive mayors from the Al Jama-ah, a party which held only three council seats out of 270. In 2024 an ANC-headed coalition with the EFF came to power, which gave the mayoral chair to Dada Morero. Each of these transitions was accompanied by the reshuffling of the Mayoral Committee, the review of senior administrative appointments and, in several cases, by the dismissal or non-renewal of the contract of the city manager.

Associated with increasing turbulence in the mayor's office, there was turbulence in mayoral committees, with the average tenure of an MMC declining sharply from 120 months during Masondo's term, to the still respectable 40 months during the period of Parks Tau, to mere weeks under Matongo and Moerane. It recovered slightly under Phalatse, collapsed again during the Al-Jamah mayorship and has recovered marginally since then. Somewhat less dramatic, but largely following MMC trends, the tenure of senior executives in municipal departments has suffered similar instability, declining from an average of 60 months to less than two years.

The South African Cities Network argues that the administrative instability in the Metro is a function of the volatility introduced by coalition arrangements, particularly minority coalitions. Senior management instability cascaded downwards, producing low morale among mid-ranking officials and the steady departure of staff with transferable skills.[62] Under conditions of coalition volatility the centre of administrative gravity in the City migrated into the office of the executive mayor, where administrative decisions were taken. Reports had to be signed off there before proceeding to the Section 79 committees and to the council. The Speaker's office, designed in 2006 to be a counterweight, was incapable of providing balance in practice.[63]

It is at this point that the limitations of the 2006 architecture become difficult to obscure. The Section 79 model presumes a settled governing majority. It presumed that committee chairs would be drawn from that majority, that they would discharge their oversight role with the cover and discipline of a governing caucus, and that the political party from which the executive was drawn would also provide legislative oversight of the executive. Under a coalition government these assumptions fail. [64]
Committee chairs become bargaining counters in coalition negotiations.[54] The Speaker's office, the Whippery and the LOEB, designed for a council in which executive and legislature operated through a stable internal party machinery, have to discharge their functions across coalition partners who do not, in fact, share caucus discipline at all. The Whippery, which Mbunge's 2014 study of the council had already found to be weak under single-party conditions, has become dysfunctional. The political offices that were supposed to mediate between the executive and the legislature have instead become the staging ground of coalition renegotiation. The mayoral committee and the boards of the municipal owned entities have, in turn, become spoils of coalition deal-making.[55]

For this report we prepared a political stability index and plotted it against an index generated

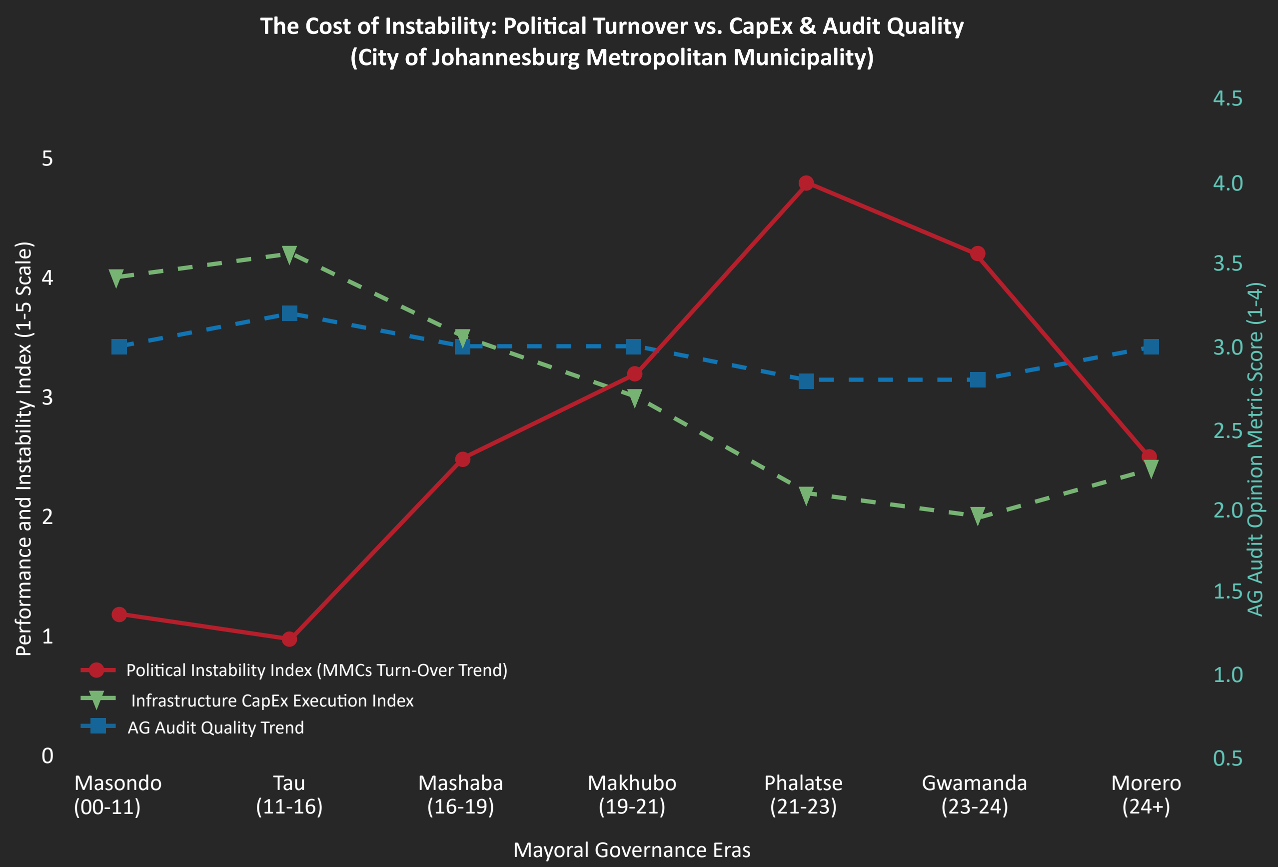


Figure 7: Political Turnover vs Capital Expenditure and Audit Results.

from Auditor General findings on Johannesburg, as well as broad Capital Expenditure trends. (The methodology is discussed in an appendix to this report).

Figure 7 shows that as political volatility in the mayor's office and the mayoral committee increased, infrastructure spending declined and the AG reported a situation of deteriorating financial controls.[56]

It is in this context that we must understand the City's dire financial situation today. Earlier in this report, we noted how, unlike in Cape Town, there was a growing gap between budgeted revenue and actual revenue in Johannesburg, beginning in 2012/13 and widening thereafter. It is worth noting that the deterioration of the City's finances started prior to the coalition period. We will return to this.

On the 23rd of April 2026, Finance Minister, Enoch Godongwana, wrote to Johannesburg Executive Mayor Dada Morero, pointing out that the city had transgressed the regulations of the Municipal Finance Management Act (MFMA). His letter noted that Johannesburg's budget was absurdly unrealistic, citing the following:

- Revenue collection was not meeting budgeted targets Johannesburg Water was overestimating its revenue from service charges
- There was over expenditure of roughly R3.9 billion in employee related costs and bulk purchases of electricity
- The Johannesburg Roads Agency had budgeted to spend R708.6 million, but did not have that amount of money in the bank

Most worryingly, Godongwana noted that the City had signed an agreement with the South African Municipal Workers' Union (SAMWU) committing to paying R10.3 billion in pay increases over the next two years. "Given that the city is in financial distress," he wondered, "it is unclear how the City intends to fund these salary increases (...)". The letter concluded with a peremptory instruction: "You are hereby directed to stop proceeding with the implementation of this illegally signed agreement that has the potential to destroy the sustainability of the City of Johannesburg (...)."[57]

8.
It is not just instability

In March 2025 President Cyril Ramaphosa announced a Presidential Johannesburg Working Group, to “bring in all levels of government and the expertise of our stakeholders to accelerate service delivery, stabilise the city's financial and operational capacities, and enable economic growth and job creation.”[58] Chaired by the Director-General of the Presidency, it will operate for an initial period of two years across eight workstreams covering governance, financial sustainability, improving service delivery, water and sanitation, electricity, inner-city regeneration and township renewal, revitalising cultural and heritage institutions, and safety, law enforcement and urban security. In substantive terms it is an admission that the model adopted in 2006 and consolidated thereafter is no longer working.[59]

Graeme Götz and his co-authors, writing in mid-2025, observed that Johannesburg is now the only South African metropolitan council whose service delivery responsibilities have been almost wholly transferred to municipally owned entities whose boards are populated by deployees of the parties that make up the governing coalition.[71] He proposed that the corporatised estate produced by iGoli 2002 has now become, perversely, the principal site at which coalition patronage operates. The Section 79 committees were not designed to oversee corporatised entities of this kind, and several empirical studies (Mbunge, Chikwema, Mokgari and Pwaka) have shown that even under more benign conditions of single-party rule they could not. Essentially, the metropolitan government that was intended to unify Johannesburg as a single, coherent city, has been divided and distributed amongst diverse political parties, who treat the department or utility that they now control as fiefdoms.

A key finding from reviewing Johannesburg's annual reports, financial statements, and AG reports is that the City's governance challenges are more about institutional capability than just staffing numbers or budget limits. Managing human resources is not just an administrative task; people are central to leadership stability, organisational strength, service delivery, financial management, and overall performance. Financial data shows that payroll expenditure has grown significantly, from about R5.1 billion in 2009 to around R15.8 billion in 2023. This is one of the fastest-growing areas of municipal spending. At the same time, spending on contracted services also went up, from about R2 billion in 2009 to between R6 and R7 billion in recent years. Johannesburg is spending much more on both employees and contractors.

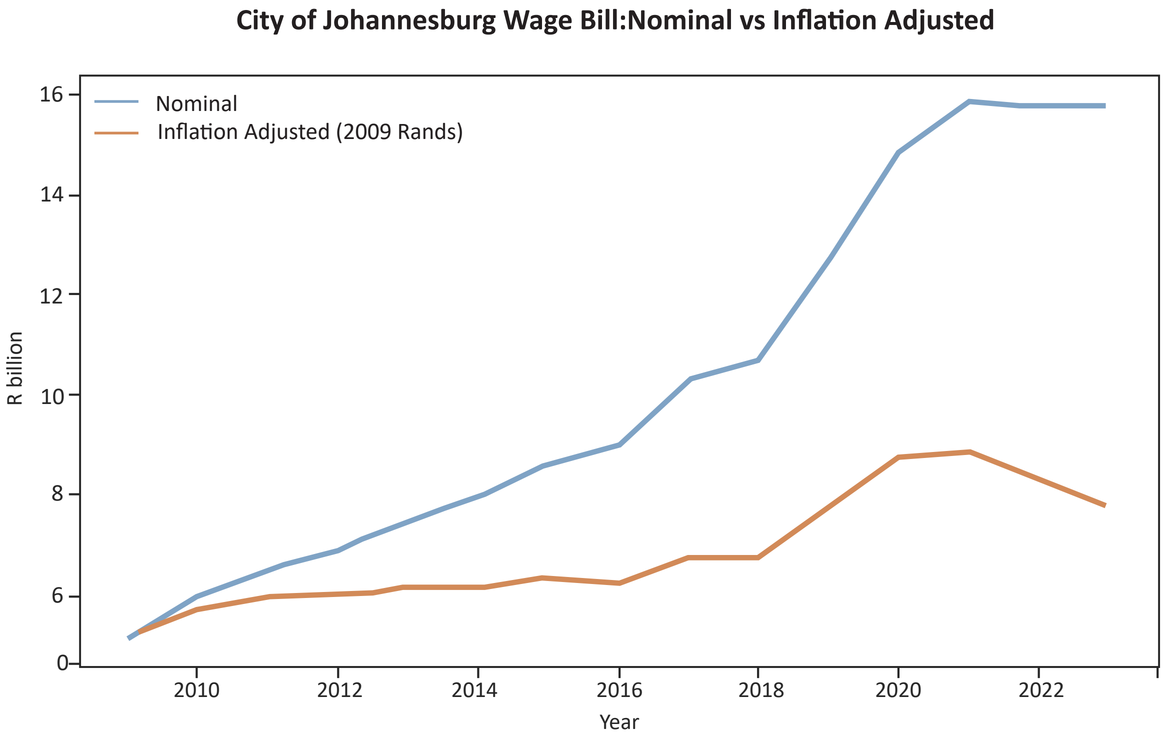


Figure 7: City of Johannesburg Wage Bill, 2010-2022 [60]

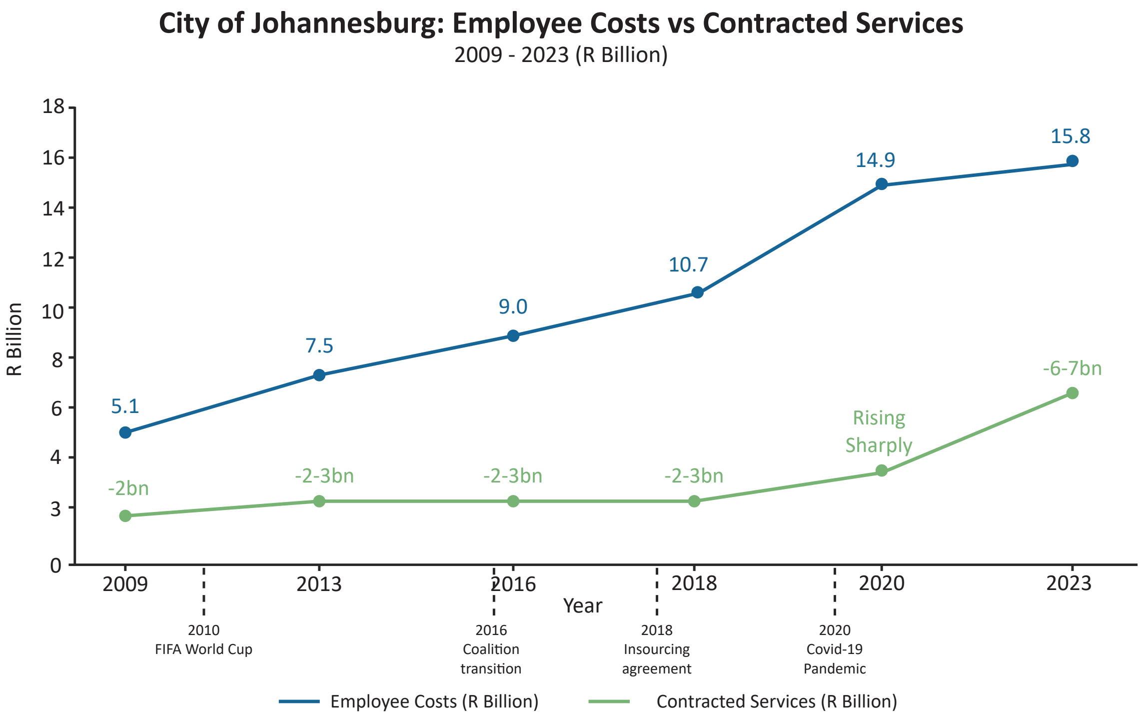


Figure 9: City of Johannesburg Employee Costs vs Contracted Services, 2009-2013 [61]

The timing coincides with an important political development in Johannesburg. Following the 2016 local government elections, Herman Mashaba's DA-led administration governed without an outright majority, in alliance with IFP. It relied heavily on support from the EFF. One of the EFF's key demands nationally and locally was the insourcing of workers employed through labour brokers and outsourced service arrangements. The EFF, alongside the South African Municipal Workers Union, argued that outsourced workers received lower wages, fewer benefits and less job security than directly employed municipal workers.

During this coalition period, insourcing became one of the most significant labour and political issues facing the City. Workers previously reported under, and paid through, outsourced services or labour contracts were transferred onto the municipal payroll. I return to this later on.

This was an important development, giving some protection to a class of vulnerable workers. Yet it also raises other questions about the size and composition of the municipal staff and how appointments in the municipality are made. In April the Public Service Amendment Act became law, stripping powers from the political executive to appoint staff in national and provincial departments.

In this context, several scholars have suggested that the “longer-term project,” presumably for the City, “is to build a capable administration with clear political direction and oversight but insulated from personal agendas and factional battles.”[62] The 2026 DWPLG suggests the same. Echoing the language of the National Development Plan it proposes that the

> (…) political-administrative interface must be the disciplined boundary between elected leaders setting policy direction and holding the administration accountable, and professional officials implementing those decisions lawfully and competently without political interference (…). [63]

Concretely, the DWPLG suggests that municipal councils should continue to appoint municipal managers, though through an “independent, professionalised process with transparent criteria, stronger compliance checks, and the explicit abolition of ‘political suitability’ as a selection requirement.”[64] These proposals would bring local government in line with the spirit of the Public Service Amendment Act, which became law on 1 April 2026. In the case of Johannesburg, and of municipalities in general, this is not enough. It is not enough to build a capable and autonomous municipal administration in Johannesburg. Basic questions of how the City’s diverse parts relate to one another also need to be settled.

9. Joburg's Billing Crisis

This becomes evident when we consider Johannesburg's billing crisis, which is not primarily a finance problem or even an affordability problem, but an institutional design one. The billing crisis is an expression of the City's ambivalence towards the utilities and the objective difficulty of managing such a complex architecture.

Johannesburg's billing crisis has its roots in the city's post-apartheid amalgamation. As we have discussed, Johannesburg responded to the financial crisis of the original metropolitan model (with its four substructures) with iGoli 2002, a plan to create a unitary government across the whole city, but serviced by corporatised utilities, with City Power, Johannesburg Water, Pikitup and the Johannesburg Roads Agency at the core.

In an interview conducted by the author with Philip van Ryneveld[65] on 22 May 2026, he shared the view that billing exposes a central tension in this model. Johannesburg historically operated a consolidated account, that is, it sent customers a single, unified bill that combined multiple municipal charges in one statement. Such a system had three major advantages. First, it avoided the cost and complexity of separate billing systems. Second, it allowed the City to use electricity cut-offs as an enforcement mechanism for the whole municipal account. If an account was not paid or not paid in full, the City would cut off electricity until charges for all services were paid. Third, a consolidated account allowed the city to benefit from the interest that accrued from hundreds of millions of rands flowing across its accounts every day.

In a properly constituted shared-services arrangement, the utility contracts the service, holds the provider to a standard, and, if performance is poor, is free to terminate the relationship and develop its own capacity instead. It is this right of exit that disciplines the service provider. In Johannesburg neither condition holds. The Revenue Shared Services Centre reports to the City's Chief Financial Officer rather than to the utilities it serves, so its accountability runs upward to Group Finance rather than to its clients. The utilities, moreover, are not permitted to terminate service providers or render the service themselves. The consequences are asymmetric: poor billing performance costs the Centre nothing, while City Power and Johannesburg Water carry the revenue losses, the query volumes and the customer anger.

Under the original iGoli 2002 design, City Power and Johannesburg Water were entitled to bill and collect roughly half of their cash flows themselves, from their largest customers. That power was subsequently withdrawn.

Settling on a billing system in Johannesburg, therefore, was not simply an administrative or IT question. It raised basic questions about the institutional architecture of the City and how it should be managed.[66] One of the key lessons from the introduction of systems like e-Filing at the South African Revenue Service is that IT platforms have to be built on the back of carefully designed manual processes. IT systems, essentially, automate manual systems.[80] As Mazibuko puts it, "a billing system is an online tool, real-time solution which (…) enforces specified business processes that are determined by management."[67] If these business processes are not in place, then a new IT system does not solve the problem; it codifies the confusion in rules and instructions that are obscure to anyone but computer programmers.

These inherent problems were compounded by the scale of the technical challenge in Johannesburg and across the country. Metropolitan Johannesburg was a composite of several, different governance processes: diverse IT systems of different ages and provenance, databases, meter-reading practices, property records and billing rules. The City had to consolidate these systems horizontally across old municipal boundaries and vertically across service functions such as water, electricity, rates and refuse. In 2010 the City of Johannesburg sent out over a million accounts every month.[68] If even 1% of those had errors, that would be 10000 problems a month: call centre complaints, callouts to service teams to check meters or cables and so on. In fact, the real numbers were much higher.

In 2009, the City launched project Phakama, a R580 million initiative to consolidate Johannesburg's fragmented billing systems onto a single SAP Enterprise Resource Planning platform. The City completed the implementation in June 2010, aiming to serve 1.3 million account holders with integrated billing for rates, water, refuse removal and electricity. By 2011 the system had failed dramatically. Sixty thousand billing queries had been logged that year, and only 35535 of them had been responded to. One researcher commented at the time, somewhat laconically, "it was not clear what would happen to the balance of 24465."[69] These problems have persisted. In 2025, City Power said it was taking control of electricity billing, in a bid to "resolve the long-standing billing challenges" experienced with the City. [70]

The technical challenges expressed the tension at the heart of Johannesburg's metropolitan model. As long as the city could not decide how it would relate to its utilities, the 'technical' challenges were unsolvable. Indeed, we will see in the next section that the recent history of Johannesburg has been characterised by efforts to weaken the autonomy of the utilities by taking greater control of their boards and, especially, who is appointed to them.

10.
The Time of Coalition Government

When Herman Mashaba came into office in 2016, he claimed the City was a hotbed of corruption. In his Mayor's letter for the Annual Report for that year he notes that the City was under great economic strain, compounded by "deep-rooted levels of corruption, open sabotage by hostile elements of our administration working with outside forces to destabilise our government and senior management dominated by patronage rather than fit for purpose selections."[71]

The claims were not outlandish. In 2018, Stephen von Coller was appointed CEO of the IT services company, EOH, to lead a turn-around strategy after the previous management was implicated in tender corruption. He provided the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of State Capture, Corruption and Fraud in the Public Sector, including Organs of State, known colloquially as the Zondo Commission, with evidence of EOH corruption in the City of Johannesburg.[72] The evidence implicated then MMC for Finance, Geoffrey Makhubo, who was also the treasurer for the Greater Johannesburg ANC. Tens of millions of rands were allegedly paid by EOH and its former executive, Jehan Mackay, to office-bearers of the ANC, in donations to the ANC and in payment of ANC expenses.[73] In return, EOH and companies that it owned were awarded tenders sometimes worth hundreds of millions of rand. Even after these allegations surfaced, the ANC later appointed Geoffrey Makhubo as the executive mayor of Johannesburg in December 2019.

According to Trevor Fowler (interviewed in Johannesburg by the author on 4 June 2026), city manager of Johannesburg during Parks Tau's mayorship, the Makhubo incident was not an isolated one. It reflected how the city and its resources had become a target for ANC regional factions contesting for power. Such elite contestation was especially acute during the Amos Masondo administration, Fowler suggests. What brought it under control when Parks Tau entered office, was the unusual status of Fowler himself, not in the City administration, but in the ANC. Fowler notes: "I was senior in the ANC and this allowed me to manage the regional politics". Before moving to the City of Johannesburg, he had been Gauteng MEC for Development Planning and Local Government, then Chief of Staff in the Presidency and finally Director General in the Presidency during Thabo Mbeki's second term and the Presidency of Kgalema Motlanthe. In other words, Fowler's authority in Johannesburg did not come from his official position in the City, but from his standing in the party. Clearly, even this was not enough. Geoffrey Makhubo's corruption happened on his watch. [74]

Therein lies one of the fundamental flaws of the system of government in Johannesburg, as in all other municipalities. The position of head of the city administration or municipal administration does not, in and of itself, vest the person who holds that office with sufficient authority to stop politicians from over-reaching into the administrative domain. The configuration of power in the municipality, that is, does not adequately constitute the administrative domain as an autonomous sphere of government. When Fowler left the city in 2017, the logic of the municipal party-state came dramatically to the fore. The difference was that the government in question was not an ANC-dominated one, but a multi-party coalition.

Herman Mashaba's August 2016 election as Johannesburg's first post-1994 non-ANC mayor was dependent on the EFF's political support. With the ANC polling below 45%, the DA at a little over 38%, and the EFF 11%[89] in the 2016 municipal elections, Mashaba could not have secured the mayoral position without the EFF's 30 council seats. Although the EFF declined to join the coalition formally, the party, nonetheless, strategically voted for Mashaba to remove the ANC from power.[90]

As already explained, the EFF used its power to influence staffing decisions in the City. Beginning in 2017/2018, the City of Johannesburg converted casual contract workers into permanent municipal employees. The programme included insourcing 1879 cleaners, predominantly women, and over 1600 security guards.[91] For cleaners earning R3000 monthly through outsourced contractors, insourcing raised salaries to approximately R5600 (over R4000 after deductions) while providing pension contributions, medical aid, and job security. The EFF framed this as the elimination of casualisation and worker exploitation, consistent with their 2016 municipal manifesto.[92] In Figures 7 and 8, showing changes in the nominal wage bill in Johannesburg, there is a noticeable rise in expenditure from 2018. This uptick reflects the concession to the EFF.

Insourcing workers, moreover, did not simply change their employment status and raise their salaries. Their former managers and supervisors were not part of the insourcing deal. Essentially, a large body of workers was brought into the city with the discretion to work when and how it chose to.[93] In addition, the EFF appointed many of their own political officers, who were frequently unsuited to their new roles, as city officials.[94] In effect, a major human resources decision was made, not by the city manager in response to the material needs of the organisation, but because it was requested by the ‘queen maker’ in the balance of power between the DA and the ANC.

Here was a textbook instance of American-style Tammany Hall politics in Johannesburg. It was possible because the city manager’s office is not endowed with sufficient authority or autonomy in and of itself to manage political interference in the administration.

11. Reining in the Utilities

In Johannesburg's entities, operational staff were insulated from the political executive by a thin corporate film; thin because the city as shareholder appointed the boards. Prior to 2017, board members were comparatively long-serving, qualified and experienced. In some entities, like Johannesburg Water, operations were run largely by the French company Suez-Lyonnaise des Eaux, through the Johannesburg Water Management Company, which included South African firm, Group Five. The contract was not extended beyond 2006, even though this arrangement saw a significant improvement in the performance of Johannesburg Water during this period. In City Power, Getty Simelane was board chair from 2001 until 2012, when Frank Chikane took over. Like Trevor Fowler, Chikane was a senior political figure in the ANC. When the board's term of office expired in March 2016, Mashaba did not renew it. We will return to this in a subsequent section. The same year, the City changed the tenure of boards from five-years to *annually renewable* contracts. As discussed earlier, Herman Mashaba was critical of the structural autonomy of the corporatised units and sought to bring them under closer municipal control.

After Mashaba's alliance collapsed in 2019, the ANC returned to power in Johannesburg, in an administration headed by Geoffrey Makhubo. We have already seen that Makhubo was implicated in massive corruption related to EOH and IT contracts in the city. He wielded his new powers aggressively. In City Power, for example, the entire board was removed and replaced three times, on the 11 March 2020, 10 February 2021 and 15 February 2022.[76] There was rapid turnover in the senior executive as well; five different people rotated through the CEO/acting-CEO and CFO/acting-CFO seats in a single year. In Pikitup, Johannesburg's waste-management entity, for example, Dr Patricia Hanekom, who had been chair of the board from 2015 was replaced by Bhekisisa Shongwe.[77] By 2020, Shongwe had been replaced by Nompumelelo Mkhize.[78] William Mathamela is named as the chair of the board in Pikitup's 2021/22 Draft Business Plan,[79] but it appears as if he was replaced by Maxwell Nedzamba in 2023.[99] Nedzamba is currently named on Pikitup's website as the chair of the board. The senior executive of Pikitup also saw a period of instability. Lungile Dhlamini, who had only been in the position since 2017, resigned as Pikitup Managing Director (MD) in late 2018 and an acting MD was put in place. Pikitup's 2020/21 Business Plan reflects that Bukelwa Njingolo was MD at that time, a position she still holds.[100]

In addition, there is a noticeable and concerning trend in the qualification and experience profiles of board members. Consider City Power, which is an engineering and capital business, buying bulk power from Eskom and running a physical distribution network for Johannesburg under the

National Energy Regulator of South Africa price regulations. King IV regulations, especially Principle 7[80], provide a useful guide for the profile of such an organisation. It needs to have a strong technical/ engineering core, an ability to set tariffs, protect revenue and asset values through a finance and accounting capacity, have expertise in legal/ regulatory compliance, commercial management, and an ICT/ digital competence to adapt to new, emerging technologies.

In the first decade of City Power's establishment, boards and senior executive teams broadly had these skills, though they tended to be heavy on technical and finance experts. In around 2019/20 there was a shift. Boards had a low proportion of engineers and there was a shift to those with generalist business and management profiles. In City Power in 2019, two of the nine board members had only a matric and a basic post-matric certificate. Some had a three-year, undergraduate degree in business or in social sciences.[81] The following year the technical core hollowed out further and the proportion of those with generalist social science degrees rose.[82]

Pikitup's early boards and senior executive teams, like those in City Power, were well qualified and experienced. Later boards were more mixed affairs, retaining some qualified technicians but also including directors with basic educations. As operational and oversight positions have become more politicised, so has the technical alignment between the utilities' processes, like IT platforms and billing systems deteriorated, and corruption has risen.

12. The South African Municipal Workers' Union (SAMWU)

Opposition to the 'neoliberal' structuring of the city, made it possible for SAMWU and other anti-privatisation groups to frame further disruptions to the utilities as elements of a progressive, urban politics. The union had denounced the iGoli 2002 restructuring as being anti-poor and had mobilised against city plans in the spirit of social movement unionism, resurrecting the "discourse of labour-community links".[83]

The problem, as Barchiesi noted at the time, was that the union was divided. Johannesburg organisers were focused on protecting their members' jobs and benefits, whilst the leadership was preoccupied with its "principled war on privatisation".[84] The union members, moreover, faced real challenges, as did many manual workers in the city, especially those in the waste and sanitation sector. As Melanie Samson has documented, the ANC sometimes used the emancipatory language of 'community participation' to support projects that, effectively, shifted the costs of sanitation work from the municipality onto poor communities, undercutting secure Pikitup employment, especially amongst women.

Township residents, who could not afford services were encouraged through campaigns like 'Letsema' to contribute with their labour. In effect, the message shifted from "pay for your services" to what Samson calls "pay up or sweep up." Letsema represented unpaid work as patriotic activism and "self-liberation", but in reality devolved responsibility to poor residents without supplying equivalent public resources, permanent employment or labour rights.[85] This was compounded by two factors: Pikitup reduced expenditure on non-revenue generating activities by reducing the number of street cleaners it employed and by outsourcing such work to service providers that used non-unionised labour at much lower rates of pay and no benefits. [86]

When the EFF demanded the in-sourcing of cleaners and security guards in the city, they were taking up an important demand. Within SAMWU, however, these bread-and-butter issues were paired with a politics that rejected the utilities existentially. It fostered a labour radicalism often ready to break with the law and the norms of labour relations. It also aggravated tensions within the union itself.

From 2012 the union's finances came under suspicion after its finance committee stopped reporting. Those who pressed for answers were suspended and expelled, resulting in a spate of litigation between 2012 and 2014.[87] The courts set the expulsions aside in 2014 and the aggrieved parties formed Save Our SAMWU.

By 2015 the union had split three ways, into SAMWU, the Municipal and Allied Trade Union of South Africa (MATUSA) and the Democratic

Municipal and Allied Workers' Union of South Africa (DEMAWUSA). In the same period SAMWU's Johannesburg members at Pikitup went on strike four times between November 2015 and April 2016, each time without declaring a dispute, twice in defiance of Labour Court interdicts, and finally in circumstances that saw the union and its General Secretary convicted of contempt of court.[88] Members in union regalia also upended refuse bins in the street outside the court. Incredibly, SAMWU directed wage demands at Pikitup's board, knowing that municipal wages are set collectively at the bargaining council, not by individual employers. Pikitup was bound by this agreement and could not have acceded to these demands even if it had wanted to. What SAMWU seemed to be rejecting, therefore, was the very bargaining system itself.

This is what makes Barchiesi's concern about social movement unionism after 1994 apposite in Johannesburg. Historically, social movement unionism had drawn its strength from mobilising workers and communities against a state that the majority of South Africans, especially workers, did not recognise as legitimate. Is this what was driving union action in Johannesburg, the sense that structure of the city itself was intolerable?

Ephraim Harvey wrote a very strongly worded critique of the union in 2016, deploring its "anti-social conduct" He ended:

> Samwu needs urgently to disabuse itself of the notion that wildcat strikes and violence are necessary, helpful or revolutionary, or that they serve to strengthen its hand in its members' labour struggles. Anarchic violence and criminality, especially as part of already illegal strikes, (…) serve to reinforce the impression of a sad decline in the unions over the past decade.[89]

Over and above what such militancy said about the union and unionism in South Africa, for Johannesburg, such rebelliousness disrupted the routine functions of service delivery, often leaving the city broken, filthy and unhygienic. Reducing the utilities to instances of 'neoliberalism', that is, overlooked the simple fact that the utilities also enclosed large parts of the city's administration. Effectively, an attack on Pikitup, for example, was an attack on the everyday routines of collecting rubbish, sweeping the streets and keeping spaces clean.

13.
Municipal Capture

Much of the commentary on Johannesburg identifies 2016 as the turning point in the City's fortunes, the moment of the strange, unofficial coalition between the DA and the EFF. "Governance challenges underpin many of Johannesburg's difficulties. Since 2016 the city has been characterised by unstable coalitions, frequent changes in political leadership, high vacancy rates in senior management and weak policy continuity," notes a Gauteng City-Region Observatory (GCRO) report.[90] The decision to change the tenure of the boards from five years to one-year contracts is certainly an important shift. Mashaba's folly was driven by a genuine concern, however, one that requires that we rethink the periodisation of the City's troubles.

For example, Lisa Seftel, the former Executive Director for Transport in the City of Johannesburg interviewed by the author on 08 June 2026, insists that 2012, and not 2016, is the key moment of change. Roland Hunter, interviewed by the author on 7 May 2026, shared that other former city officials agree with this periodisation. This is when the infrastructure of 'municipal capture' was put in place.

The Parks Tau administration in Johannesburg, like the Zuma government nationally, sought to be a modernising one. There were ambitious plans to deliver free Wi-Fi throughout the city and to overcome the apartheid racial-spatial organisation of the city through 'corridors of freedom'. Tau had been looking for a defining strategic vision for his administration and in May 2013, he announced a project that "will forever change the urban structure of Johannesburg and eradicate the legacy of Apartheid spatial planning." The Gautrain project had already seen a major investment in public transport, linking central Johannesburg to Sandton, OR Tambo International Airport and Pretoria. Together with the Bus Rapid Transit system, city planners and developers were seeing in Transit Oriented Development (TOD) an opportunity to advance economic, spatial and social inclusion in the city through a development methodology that focused on public participation.[93] In 2018, some scholars were still optimistic that the scheme could have positive effects.

> The C[orridor] o[f] F[reedom] is clearly not the panacea to the ills of Johannesburg. (...) We could dismiss the Corridors as "lipstick on a pig" or we could accept that the complex and multifaceted challenges of the CoJ require multiple interventions across a range of dimensions over an extended period and that the sustained implementation of CoF has the potential to make a valuable, albeit partial, contribution.[94]

The plan saw Johannesburg buy up the buildings along Louis Botha Avenue, a major arterial route linking Alexandra township in the north to inner city areas and the central business district. Whatever the benefits of the scheme were, it marked a strategic shift away from service delivery as the city's primary task. Indeed, one city official proposed that whereas the Masondo administration was 80% focused on service delivery and 20% on transformative urban projects, this reversed under Parks Tau.[109]

The new focus on large capital projects coincided with an interest amongst urban scholars and policy makers with ‘coproduction’. This is a term that had first been developed by Elinor Ostrom and colleagues at Indiana University in the late 1970s.[95] It became popular in the 2000s and especially after 2009, when Ostrom won the Nobel Prize in Economics. The emphasis on participation and consultation resonated with ‘progressive’ planning concepts, like ‘community driven development’ and ‘deep democracy’ that had been developed in the struggle against apartheid local government in organisations like Planact.[96] In the hands of the Parks Tau administration, it was given a specific twist. ‘Coproduction’ did not refer to development projects undertaken or implemented by the city’s own administration in cooperation with community or resident groups. Instead, ‘‘coproduction’ was another name for an outsourcing model, where projects would be implemented by small-scale, black-owned contractors. “The idea was that there would be intermediaries, which were contracted to the city, and they would set up groups of unskilled workers, generally recruited from ANC branches, who would do cleanups, in addition to city employees.”[97]

During this same period, at a national level, political networks, officials in the Department of Trade and Industry, and others in then President Zuma’s administration were becoming preoccupied with outsourcing in State Owned Enterprises (SOEs) like Eskom and Transnet, to transform the economy and to break the hold of ‘white monopoly capital’.[98] There the language was not that of ‘coproduction’ but of ‘radical economic transformation’.

Either way, the model, using the state to privilege select economic players by awarding them public contracts, hinged on a political ambiguity. Who would choose the beneficiaries of outsourced contracts and how would they be chosen? During the ‘state capture’ years, beneficiaries of SOE contracts were largely people or companies linked to President Zuma himself or to people associated with him (the Guptas, for example). In Johannesburg, ANC regional networks competed for control of these opportunities.

Geoffrey Makhubo, whom we discussed earlier, was, on evidence led before the Zondo Commission, an important gatekeeper in the City of Johannesburg.[99] EOH was selected for IT contracts in the city because the company was prepared to pay huge kickbacks to Makhubo’s regional base in the Greater Johannesburg ANC. There was similar gatekeeping in other areas of Joburg’s operations: the provision of security guards, suppliers of water tankers, contracts for road maintenance and repairs, and so on.

Dr Sean Phillips was appointed as Managing Director and Accounting Officer of the Johannesburg Roads Agency in May 2016. In March 2017, the term of the ANC-appointed board came to an end, and a new one was appointed. The IFP, a partner in the new DA-led coalition, was given the transport portfolio. According to Phillips “[M]ost of the board members were new and appeared to have been chosen by the IFP.” [100] Relations between Phillips and the MMC deteriorated when the new board chairperson, Sipho Tshabalala, allegedly insisted that he be involved in decisions to award tenders. As defined in the MFMA, this would have been illegal. When

Phillips pushed back, the board established a Project Management Unit, responsible for procurement, effectively by-passing Phillips' office. These developments were brought to Herman Mashaba's attention, but Phillips notes, "I was very disappointed in the Mayor (...) I had expected him to at least confirm to the chairperson that he may not be involved in the award of tenders." When he did not, Phillips resigned. As Managing Director of a city utility, he did not have the power to defend the relative autonomy of his administrative 'sphere'.

From this perspective, 2016 appears less as a rupture than as a continuation. Herman Mashaba, when he became Mayor of Johannesburg, did not interrupt this *modus operandi*. He did not like that the beneficiaries of municipal contracts were tied to ANC political networks, but he was in favour of the principle of using SMMEs to do the city's work. At a campaign rally before becoming mayor, Mashaba promised: "Small businesses create jobs. That is why small business development will be the focus of my term in office. I will cut the red tape, subsidise city-owned property rentals, and carve up big contracts and tenders, so that small businesses can participate in the City's economy." [102]

As we saw earlier, spending on contracted services rose sharply after 2018. In the preceding decade, Johannesburg spent between R2 and R3 billion a year on suppliers; thereafter, the figure climbed steadily, reaching more than R6 billion in 2023. Not all of this was corrupt expenditure. Yet, in the absence of a strong and autonomous administrative centre, there was no-one to ensure that suppliers were providing value for money or were even delivering anything at all.

This was not capture of the City's key institutions by a particular political faction, as happened in Nelson Mandela Bay,[103] but the unravelling of the City by uncoordinated officials and businesses. Singular capture produces a corrupt city that still functions as a city. Plural capture produces a metro that has ceased to be a single administrative object at all.

14. Conclusion: What is Johannesburg's crisis?

Johannesburg is in crisis. This report has offered a definition of this crisis and proposes a way to resolve it.

The dominant approach to reform, captured most clearly in the 2026 DWPLG, understands this crisis as a failure of governance and leadership. This report has argued that such a diagnosis is insufficient. Johannesburg's crisis is not simply that different systems are poorly coordinated. Rather, one of these 'systems', the municipal administration, has not been allowed to emerge as an autonomous institutional area of government in its own right. We have seen that in terms of the Municipal Structures Act and the MSA, the city manager is named the head of the municipal administration, but often without core administrative powers, especially the power to appoint staff. Instead, these powers reside with the municipal council, a legislative and executive body rolled into one.

In this context, the separation of powers and the emergence of the municipal administration as a distinct area of government within municipalities is, essentially, discretionary and performative. It comes properly into existence to the extent that the party in power in the municipality acts as if it exists. This goes to the heart of the paradox of local government in South Africa today: some municipalities perform much better than others. When political parties, usually the DA, sometimes the ANC, allow a professional and relatively autonomous local administration to emerge, service delivery improves.

In iGoli 2002, Johannesburg, unlike other municipalities, responded to the law's own ambivalence to administration by establishing municipal entities, effectively insulating their administrations behind a corporate wall. This set up a tension in the City that has shaped its internal life ever since. Johannesburg's history over the last 24 years can be summarised as the struggle over whether to grant the utilities their autonomy or to rein them in. This is not simply a struggle about decentralisation versus centralisation, it is about the preparedness of the majority party and its politicians to cede some of their authority to municipal officials – to allow the municipal administration to emerge as such.

We saw that, during the Masondo administration, this ambivalence played out regularly, with the mayor sometimes defending officials from undue political influence and sometimes not. Councillors were under fierce pressure from party political networks to redirect opportunities and resources into local patronage networks. The Parks Tau administration was better able to manage elite contestation over city resources by installing a powerful party-political figure into the position of city manager. We saw that Trevor Fowler's ability to push back against political pressure came, not from his powers as head of the administration, but from his status in the majority party. This was true of department heads as well. They could run a 'strict ship' to the extent that their personality or their political standing allowed them to fend off inappropriate political requests. If a municipal manager lacked such political authority in the majority party, they became subject to the whims of the mayor, the Mayoral Committee and party-political decisions.

This is what happened after the ANC lost the municipal election in 2016 and a tacit DA-EFF coalition ruled Johannesburg. The Mashaba government saw the space of the administration, at best a performative arena, largely disappear. Important staffing decisions, like insourcing cleaners and security staff, were taken not by the city manager, but by the EFF. Human resource decisions thus reflected party-political bargains.

We saw too that in 2017, the boards of utilities were appointed on one-year contracts, which could be renewed (or not), giving the executive authority much greater authority over them. From 2019, under a new ANC alliance, board directors changed regularly and their collective skills and experience were hollowed out. Coalition parties have been awarded their own utility or area of municipal administration to run in return for their support - a South African version of municipal Tammany Hall.

Johannesburg's deterioration has been further aggravated by political decisions about the role of the City. We have seen that from around 2011, Johannesburg's leaders moved away from a focus on service delivery as the primary role of the City, to one that emphasised transformational urban projects. The time of the city planners came with an interest in outsourcing as a model of urban governance. It had a 'progressive' framing in the language of 'coproduction' or a 'liberal' one in the language of 'small business development'.

Often these left and right discourses came down to similar practices: outsourcing city functions to third party service providers. In the absence of a strong administration, however, coproduction and/or small business development saw the City's functions, whether road maintenance, the supply and repair of electrical cables, or security services, performed by contractors or suppliers without an effective system of oversight and accountability.[104] This has resulted in a catastrophic dysregulation of the city's basic operations.

What was intended as a single entity to overcome the racial legacy of the City, now writhes as a collection of uncoordinated limbs, each moving according to its own appetite, reflexes, and direction.

15.
An Agenda for Reform

An incoming city government or coalition seeking to overcome Johannesburg's crisis will be constrained by the legislative environment, especially the conflation of executive and legislative roles in the council, and the weak powers of the city manager with regards to the administration. An agenda for reform, therefore, must urgently address this context. A new local government law must formally institutionalise the autonomy of these areas of government, and provide the rules for their establishment, their roles, the limits of their authority and the processes for the selection of their personnel. Crucially, the law must establish the administration as an autonomous function in its own right and provide for the selection of the head of the municipal administration.

It is in this respect that the 2026 DWPLG does not go far enough. Even if the city manager is selected through an independent process that prioritises merit and experience, it is still the council that *appoints* the individual. An independent, merit-based selection process constrains *how* a council chooses, not from whom, and not what happens afterwards. Under conditions of internal party-political factionalism or of coalition government, a patrimonial appointment process increases the chances that the choice of city manager will be decided though a process of political haggling, rather than based on competence and experience. What is needed is a constraint on eligibility and on tenure, not merely on procedure. This is the model South African local government once had.

Crispian Olver writes:

> Regardless of whether municipalities are run by coalitions or majority parties, the interface between municipal administration and council politics is vexed – political instability in council has a deleterious effect on administrative performance, and political interference in administrative appointments and procurement is one of the primary drivers of corruption in local government.[105]

Furthermore, the White Paper does not address the fact that even if a suitable candidate is appointed, they do not have intrinsic powers to make key administrative decisions or to prevent the executive mayor or Mayoral Committee from overriding or countermanding their decisions.

Historically in South Africa, the town clerk was the head of the municipal administration. In 1960, the powers of the municipal council to appoint the town clerk were revised in the former province of the Transvaal (the situation was different in other provinces) in response to a concern that is relevant to us today. The Transvaal Local Government (Administration and Elections) Ordinance of 1960 came in the wake of the Marais Commission, which worried that councillors lacked the skills to assess suitable candidates and tended, therefore, to make poor appointments.[106] The Transvaal ordinance created a Local Government Advisory Board in Pretoria, which vetted applications for town clerk positions in the province and prepared a list of candidates it regarded as suitable and qualified. The municipal council in question had to choose from this list unless it considered none of the listed candidates suitable. In the late 1980s this model was strengthened and universalised across the country. The Profession of Town Clerks Act 75 of 1988 established a Town Clerks' Council and created registers for professional town clerks, registered town clerks and prospective town clerks.[107]

Section 20 of the Act prohibited a local authority from appointing a town clerk independently of the Town Clerks' Council. In practical terms, this meant that a municipal council's formal power to appoint was constrained by a professional association, which both determined the experience and qualifications a town clerk needed to have and vetted candidates. Moreover, the candidate had to be registered with the council itself to even be eligible for appointment. The Act did not stop at entry requirements. It also created a disciplinary regime. A registered person could be guilty of improper conduct for breaching ethical rules, behaving disgracefully or improperly in connection with duties, misusing confidential information, accepting improper rewards, misappropriating municipal property, or knowingly making false statements to obtain an advantage or cause prejudice.[123]

These provisions resonate with the *spirit* of the Framework Document for the Professionalising of the Public Sector, approved by cabinet in 2022, which moots a role for professional bodies in regulating the conduct of public servants and setting and enforcing standards of merit. Strangely, the framework document explicitly rejects applying such a model to local government and insists that "Municipal Councils (…) remain responsible for the recruitment of (…) Municipal Managers."[108]

Nonetheless, we propose the establishment of a Municipal Managers' Professional Council of South Africa, which would be a statutory professional council with SAQA-recognised professional designations. It would be responsible for registering, certifying, developing and disciplining municipal administrative executives, and *vetting* candidates, while leaving the actual *appointment* of municipal managers to elected municipal councils. Like town clerks, municipal managers would have to be registered with the Professional Council.

While there may be reforms needed at a national level, there is nevertheless a lot that a winning party or coalition can do to turn the city of Johannesburg around at a local level.

First, it must act *as if* there was an institutional separation between the legislative role of the council, the executive role of the mayor and the administrative role of the city manager. In particular, there must be a firm and binding agreement to:

- Select and appoint the city manager through a transparent, meritocratic process. Ideally in current circumstances, this should be someone with political seniority in the coalition, who also has strong technical and management skills and experience.[109]

- Make rules about delegations - giving the city manager the powers to appoint, promote and dismiss staff and make administrative decisions.

- Limit the role of the executive mayor and Mayoral Committee to developing policy and to holding the city manager and the administration accountable for implementing that policy.

- Stop the executive mayor and/or MMCs from instructing departmental officials on operational decisions, especially in the area of procurement.

Second, a new administration must overcome the City's ambivalence towards its utilities. A new administration has to face up to this challenge in a way that previous City governments have not. It must decide whether utilities are genuine, semi-autonomous businesses, or whether they are operational arms of a central municipal administration.

We propose that a new administration moves quickly to restore the autonomy and professionalism of the boards and executives of municipal entities. It should take advantage of current arrangements that have directors on one-year contracts to remove and replace those without adequate skills or experience, those implicated in corruption, and/or those whose performance has been lacklustre. The city manager should define the skills profiles for such boards, and oversee a transparent, public recruitment process, emphasising a core of technical and engineering skills and experience, strong financial experience, legal and regulatory expertise and directors with a grounding in IT and new technologies. Once new, qualified boards have been identified, they should be appointed on five-year contracts.

Third, there is an inherent tension between the commercial logic of the utilities (profit-making or breaking even) and the developmental aspirations of any city administration. This needs to be accepted and managed. SDAs should balance these imperatives on the basis of the political leanings of the government of the day.

Operationally such balancing requires an institutional mechanism. In this regard, the City should restore the CMU within the office of the city manager. It should have to report to the Mayoral Committee and the council too, so that all information enters the public domain, but not take instruction from either. The CMU must be staffed with senior and highly qualified domain experts (in electricity distribution, water reticulation, and roads management in the main), together with a team of inspectors to do site visits and monitoring. Collectively, they must report on the performance of the utilities relative to their SDAs. The city manager must be able to impose sanctions on utilities for non-performance.

Given that so much of the City's work is, effectively, done by utilities and/or service providers, a restructured CMU will necessarily be a substantial institution. If it is too small or too weak, it will not have the capacity to oversee contractors and enforce contracts. The CMU will be key to 'joining up' the various parts of the City's de facto administrations – municipal officials, municipal entities, and contractors/outsourced providers.

Utilities must be required to establish their own monitoring and evaluation units, establishing a reporting structure for service providers with the capacity to check that work has been completed, that sites have been cleaned and restored and that work was done to the standard required. Such units must report regularly to the CMU, which is able to undertake independent checks.

Fourth, a new administration should build IT platforms and/or use new technologies that allow residents and citizens of Johannesburg to access geolocated information about public works in their street and area, and to upload photos and reports about repairs and the like to supplement the work of CMU inspectors. Neighbourhood and residents' associations, together with body corporates, are potential allies and partners of the City against corruption, and shoddy work. In addition, such a platform should be used to monitor the performance of municipal agents or contractors and to enforce the terms of their SDAs or contracts. Civil society organisations and journalists should have access to such information and be free to develop their own scorecards of performing and non-performing suppliers/contractors/officials.[110]

Fifth, solving Johannesburg's billing problems means overcoming the City's ambivalence towards its utilities. A workable model could still use shared services (one billing platform, one treasury, one customer database) but with clear rules that specify whose money is whose, who controls customer credit decisions, who may authorise disconnections, how payments are allocated across services, and whether the central treasury may use utility cash for other municipal crises. Without these rules, 'ring-fencing' is simply rhetoric.

Finally, a new administration will have to work with organised labour, and above all with SAMWU. SAMWU has been in crisis since 2012 (contested finances, the expulsion of those who demanded accountability, two breakaway unions, and an application by the Registrar of Labour Relations to place it under administration). Its Johannesburg region has repeatedly acted outside the labour relations framework, striking without declaring a dispute and in defiance of Labour Court interdicts. The difficulty this presents is not only one of militancy. Disputes have been settled politically rather than through the industrial relations framework. The Pikitup strikes of 2015 and 2016 ended not at the bargaining council but through the intervention of a provincial MEC, on terms neither party was willing to disclose to the Labour Court. Nor can an incoming administration meet the union's central demand, since municipal wages are set collectively at the South African Local Government Bargaining Council and not by the City. The union's model of social movement unionism will be a sobering constraint on any new administration, however talented or popular.

This experience affirms proposals above to constitute urgently the administration and the city manager as an authoritative institution in the city that can enter and enforce binding agreements with the union(s). The absence of such an authority in the past is what made it possible for SAMWU to simply go over the head of whoever they were talking to.

Appendix

1. Political Instability Index (Scale: 1.0 to 5.0)
This index measures the structural volatility of the executive arm. It is calculated per mayoral era using two equally weighted variables: Mayoral Duration and the MMC Turnover Rate.

- Mayoral Duration Penalty: Calculated based on how long a mayor remains in office relative to a standard 60-month (5-year) democratic municipal term.
    - *Full 5-to-10-year stability* (e.g., Masondo, Tau) = 1.0
    - *Mid-term collapse* (12 to 36 months, e.g., Mashaba, Gwamanda) = 2.5 to 3.5
    - *Hyper-fragility* (Less than 3 months, e.g., Matongo, Moerane, Amad) = 4.8 to 5.0

- MMC Churn Rate: The frequency of distinct individuals changing through the 5 core macro-portfolios (Finance, Transport, Housing, Development Planning, Public Safety) during that specific era. If portfolios require multiple mid-term appointments due to coalition shifts, the index swings toward 5.0.

2. Infrastructure CapEx Execution Index (Scale: 1.0 to 5.0)
This index tracks how effectively the city executes its capital expenditure (CapEx) budget and maintains its physical infrastructure assets.

- Budget Absorption Rate (40% Weight): The percentage of the allocated capital budget actually spent by the end of the financial year. Historically, the City has maintained a high absorption rate (80%–93%), which provides a baseline score of ~3.5.
- Preventative Maintenance Allocation (30% Weight): Measures whether the City is spending the National Treasury's recommended 8% of property, plant, and equipment value on maintaining existing infrastructure. As this crashed to just 2% at utilities like City Power, this sub-metric pulled the overall index down.
- Infrastructure Backlog Factor (30% Weight): A negative modifier tracking the growth of unaddressed infrastructure backlogs (such as Johannesburg's compounding R200 billion roads, electricity, and water backlog). As the backlog escalates due to stalled project pipelines, the total index plummets toward 1.0.

3. AG Audit Quality Trend (Scale: 1.0 to 4.0)
The Auditor-General of South Africa (AGSA) issues standardised legal opinions on municipal financial management. To map these opinions

onto a chronological trendline, a four point numerical scale, based on the strict hierarchy of AG audit outcomes, was applied:

- Score 4.0: Clean Audit (Unqualified with No Findings) – The municipality's financial statements are transparent, free of material misstatements, and comply fully with the MFMA.
- Score 3.0: Unqualified with Findings – The financial statements are accurate, but the AG flagged significant compliance failures, irregular expenditure, or a failure of internal oversight controls.
- Score 2.0: Qualified Opinion – The AG found that specific areas of the financial statements contain material misstatements or lacked sufficient documentation.
- Score 1.0: Adverse or Disclaimer of Opinion – The financial records are so incomplete or misstated that the AG cannot verify the city's financial position.

I am grateful to Sarah Delius for assisting with some of the interviews for this study and for helping with background research.

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